

Superhero Influences:
Connotations and Cultural Codes in Comic Book Culture

by

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This thesis examines the role and representation of the superhero in establishing socio-political ideology through connotations and cultural codes. Beginning with an analysis of some of the earliest images of Superman and Batman from *Action Comics* #1 and *Detective Comics* #27, this thesis will capture the associative properties reflected in the Americanized superhero. While analyzing the shared characteristics of Superman and Batman, Chapter 1 also discusses the political ideology embodied in Captain America in *Captain America Comics* #1. Chapter 2 investigates the sociopolitical and socioeconomic representations in Frank Miller's *Batman: Year One* and transitions into an analytical comparison of the Punisher's role in vigilantism and Batman's personal vendetta against crime. Exploring the socioeconomic gap between Batman's character and the people of Gotham City, Chapter 3 also examines the role of the anti-hero and reads the Punisher and the Joker as the anti-hero and the supervillain.

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Connotations and Cultural Codes in Comic Book Culture

A Thesis

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by

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Superhero Influences: Connotations and Cultural Codes Enabling Political Influence, Cultural
Representation, and Socio-Political Ideology through Comic Book Culture

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Dedication

For my Dad, who introduced me to Conan, Tarzan, Spider-Man, Wolverine, and Werewolf by Night. Dad, I was always fairly confident that you were Conan the Barbarian in disguise.

My beautiful bride, Jenn, Wonder Woman. You never cease to amaze me with your strength, intelligence, and support. I love you.

My Sons, Lazarus and Ashton, I am proud of you both. You have made my life challenging, interesting, and rewarding. Go hard, all the time, go hard. I love you.

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Table of Contents

List of Figures	Page vii
Introduction	Page 1
The Heroes	Page 1
The Culture	Page 5
Chapter 1: The Americanized Superhero	Page 8
Superheroes Wear Capes: Superman	Page 8
Some Superheroes Wear Masks: Batman	Page 14
Not All Heroes Wear Capes: Captain America	Page 21
Chapter 2: Vigilantism and Cultural Representations	Page 27
Systems that Birth Vigilantes	Page 27
Who is Batman's Enemy?	Page 29
Representing Gotham City	Page 34
The Punisher's Vigilante Justice	Page 35
Chapter 3: Anti-heroes and Ideology	Page 42
Where Anti-heroes Fit in	Page 42
The Punisher and Ideology	Page 43
The Joke's not Funny: Joker as an Anti-hero	Page 45
Conclusion	Page 50
Works Cited	Page 51

List of Figures

1. Cover of <i>Action Comics</i> #1	Page 8
2. <i>Action Comics</i> #1, pane 7	Page 10
3. Cover of <i>Detective Comics</i> #27	Page 15
4. <i>Detective Comics</i> #27, Page 3	Page 16
5. <i>Detective Comics</i> #27, page 6	Page 17
6. Levels of Warfare <i>Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication</i> 1	Page 20
7. Cover of <i>Captain America Comics</i> #1	Page 22
8. Cover of <i>The Amazing Spider-Man</i> #129	Page 36

Introduction

The Heroes

Historically, the appearance of strength in charismatic figures, depictions of grandeur, motivating captions, the appeal of protection, and unwavering leadership abilities have all melded together to create a spectrum of easily indefinable heroic figures. These attributes can be summed up most appropriately with the modern superhero. With the dawn of the superhero in early comic book forms, these purveyors of justice have resembled unique and coveted qualities, strengths, capabilities, and affinities for a subjective “good”. The culture that the superhero atmosphere created was that of hope and protection, or good versus evil. Throughout the superhero universe, the affinity for good was grounded solidly in representations of truth, good, justice, and the protection of civil society. The superhero has always been easily identifiable and this helps the quick recognition of the superhero as a symbol of justice. The visual image of the superhero is the initial indicator of ultimate justice. The superhero fights for those who cannot fight for themselves, those who are oppressed, and against those who would seek to do harm to others. The superhero is an anonymous individual performing great feats of strength and cunning, sometimes with the aid of superhuman abilities and sometimes with the aid of technology, to keep people safe.

With all of these inspiring characteristics, the superhero still acts outside of the law. The only code the superhero follows is his or her own personal moral code and not necessarily the code or procedures of the society that they protect. They act of their own will and are not employed by any government entity, at least the superheroes that I will be discussing. This affords each superhero the ability to act against or for what the individual believes in, and although this is often presented in comic books as actions for the betterment of mankind or

protection against crime, there are usually some motivations outside of the lateral limits of the law. Where law enforcement officials are not able or willing to involve themselves, the superhero is there to fill in the gap. The responsibility of the superhero, though represented in a light that affords liberties to the civilians they are helping, is not necessarily to the service of the community, but to serve his or her own personal fulfillment. In other words, the actions have motives that might not always align with what is best for an oppressed or marginalized society of people.

Beginning with Superman, the image of the superhero is initially associated with a very friendly, happy, charismatic, approachable figure. Kal-El, Superman's true identity, is sent to earth from planet Krypton as an infant. His Kryptonian parents send him to earth to escape Krypton's destruction. He is found in a space pod by farming couple, Martha and Johnathan Kent, on their property. The couple took him in, named him Clark, and raised him in as wholesome a way as possible. Superman's first appearance in *Action Comics* #1, was written by Jerry Siegel and illustrated by Joe Schuster in June 1938. Their hero was introduced coming off the heels of the Great Depression. In *Action Comics* #1 "Clark decided he must turn his titanic strength into channels that would benefit mankind" as a means of birthing Superman's character (Siegel 14). Their creation, in essence, was metaphorically fighting for the oppressed people of the depression, as Thomas alludes to in his introduction to *Superman: The War Years* (Thomas 11). As Nazism and anti-Semitism escalated in Europe, Superman's moniker "champion of the oppressed" quickly translated into championing against the oppressors of World War II. This transition begins as early as *Action Comics* #2, which is further discussed in Chapter 1. The wholesome image of the caped hero becomes a symbol for justice, America, and democracy.

Batman's origin is a little grimmer and represents a character who is debating an internal struggle. His struggle derives from witnessing his parents' murder in a dark alley of Gotham City as they are all leaving a movie theater. Of note, Bruce Wayne, Batman's true identity, is not necessarily raised with the same humble beginnings as Clark Kent. Bruce Wayne is the heir to a fortune and a mansion far from the dark and dirty streets of Gotham City. In the solitude of his mansion he decides that he will avenge the memory of his parents by fighting crime. He does not possess any super powers like Superman, however his wealth allows him to create an amalgamation of gadgets and vehicles that support his crime fighting habits. His appearances are predominantly at night and his focus of effort is in street and organized crime. Rather than the charismatic handsome caped figure of Metropolis, he is a creature to be feared in the dark streets of Gotham. Batman's debut in *Detective Comics* #27 was written by Bill Finger and illustrated by Bob Kane in May 1939, roughly one year after Superman's origin. Similar to Superman, Batman's second comic book appearance in *Detective Comics* #33 by Bob Kane and Bill Finger published in November 1939, showcases him battling a figure resembling Napoleon Bonaparte, which is a reference to the fascism of Nazi Germany. Ultimately, Batman represents a figure to be feared rather than loved. He is a product of a capitalist society who has the luxury of fighting crime on the dark streets of Gotham because he is a man of means and wealth.

Captain America's first appearance in *Captain America Comics* # 1, written by Joe Simon and illustrated by Jack Kirby in March 1941, is a series of shorter stories labeled as "cases" in the comic's table of contents. His true identity, Private Steve Rogers, is the subject of a test to create an American super soldier. The test is successful, however, because of espionage, the doctor who invented the serum that created Captain America is killed and the serum formula dies with him. In the original comic books, Private Steve Rogers moonlights as

Captain America when he decides that the country needs help. His creation is roughly 9 months before the United States entered World War II. Ultimately, the image of Captain America carries with it some small amount of ideological context. It conveys a sense of patriotic American ideology and suggests that the United States is a friendly structuralized establishment that is also a pillar of strength and power. The imagery of the ultra-patriotic superhero appeals to a sense of American values that is associated with capitalistic ideals during the World War II period. Captain America serves as a branch of enforcement for these values, pushing America's agenda throughout the world with force and violence. The use of his dominance to assert authority over others is translated into the forceful implementation of American ideology and agenda. Thus, the superhero's actions become associated with a message that is correlated to justice, dominant and forceful American justice.

The Punisher is a character who, like Captain America, is affiliated with the military. He first appeared in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #129, written by Gerry Conway and illustrated by John Romita Sr and Ross Andru in February 1974. Frank Castle, originally Francis Castiglione, is a Marine Corps officer obtaining the rank of Captain before he ends his service shortly after the Vietnam War. He is a Sicilian-American hailing from New York. He returns home from the war to his wife and child who are subsequently gunned down by the Italian Mafia in Central Park. There are several versions of this story, some of which portray his wife and child being the casualties of a crossfire and some of which portray his family as witnesses to a Mafia hit who are subsequently murdered to get rid of witnesses. In either case, Frank Castle loses his wife and child to gang violence after fighting in the Vietnam War. His response to the loss of his wife and child are to retaliate first against those responsible for the death of his family and then to pursue crime and criminals throughout New York City and the rest of the United States. His tactics

include extreme violence, murder, and the use of military grade weaponry. His form of justice is representative of capital punishment, in which he dispatches the criminals with extreme brutality. He judges and executes the criminals that he pursues. His character acts in methods concurrent with that of a vigilante. His vendetta is personal and he shows no mercy to those that he pursues. He, like Batman is feared by criminals and civilians alike and possesses no super powers. Unlike Batman, he uses extreme violence and torture in his fight against crime and he does not hide his face or his identity. People know him as Frank Castle and Punisher. Though he shares military service with Captain America, that is where the similarities end, as he is not necessarily a patriot for American idealism.

The Joker, though a supervillain, represents a piece of marginalized society. He is a supervillain who made his first appearance in *Batman* #1 written by Bill Finger and illustrated by Bob Kane and Jerry Robinson in April 1940. He dresses as a clown and is known for his sinister smile and criminal insanity. For the purposes of this thesis, I will focus on Joker's origin story in *The Killing Joke*, written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Brian Bolland in March 1988, with some references to the 2019 film *Joker* directed by Todd Philips. The reason I chose these works is because I wanted to focus on the surroundings and circumstances that created the Joker. He is well known as Batman's archenemy, but he is also associated with the socioeconomically marginalized of Gotham City.

The Culture

Within the comic book universe, cultural representations of societally, economically, or politically marginalized peoples are often stereotypically depicted. In Batman's world, Gotham City, the ambiance is that of a dark, dingy, crime infested, and overpopulated city. There are typically two types of people represented within this environment, the societally or economically

marginalized, also referred to as the poor or mentally ill, and those with social, economic, and political advantage, also referred to as the rich. Though there is a difference in representation for each class of people, criminals exist within both categories. The separation that is depicted in Gotham City does not necessarily capture a middle class; rather, it portrays the desperate poor, who revert to criminal activity, and the established wealthy, who partake in criminal activity as an act of greed. The latter category also includes families of organized crime.

Often referred to as a vigilante, Batman thrives in the night, as this is when the majority of crime takes place; however, being of wealthy pedigree himself, he does not necessarily identify as a champion for the marginalized as he is averse to lethal violence within a traditionally violent city. This aversion to violence represents a cultural code and establishes him as a voice of reason or justice. The cultural code of nonlethal violence is common between Batman, Superman, and Captain America. Conversely, vigilantism often carries with it actions that exist absent of law yet are for the purpose of some form of justice. These characteristics closely relate to the role of the anti-hero, as they maintain an absence of heroic attributes, thus straying away from the common cultural code of an aversion to lethal violence. Because these actions portray the vigilante hero acting outside the law, murdering or hurting in a sense of righteousness or justice, we witness the actions of the anti-hero in the form of a superhero.

The vigilante and anti-hero types of comic book heroes typically have a background in the marginalized society represented in places like that of Gotham City. The Punisher, for example, is a Vietnam War veteran whose family is killed in a gangland crossfire. Though he hunts criminals, the only justice he seeks is revenge. He is feared by criminals and civilians alike. He is actively pursued by police and lives off of little other than what is absolutely required to survive. His justice informs killing and extreme violence. The Joker, although a

villain, shares a similar background of psychological disorder. In the most recent movie, *Joker* (Phillips 2019), he is represented as a champion for the economically, societally, and politically marginalized, a true vigilante anti-hero in the form of a supervillain.

Representing the role of the anti-hero as a champion for the marginalized creates complicated ideology and influence within a modern socio-political and socio-economic context. The absolute obverse to the vigilante hero is Superman. Though not a human, he represents everything that any human should strive to be: strong, fast, honest, physically appealing, and good natured. His will is unbendable and, like the later versions of Batman, he avoids killing at all cost. He represents the American ideology of hard work, fighting for justice in his spare time. Like Captain America, he represents an “Americanized” superhero, which encapsulates the established system of democracy that America enjoys. What’s more, he embodies the sense of the “American dream” for immigrants, as he is an immigrant himself. His efforts typically thwart powerful foes bent on world domination, which again makes him similar to Captain America in that the villains in these stories are opposed to the American way of life or liberty. As described to this point, each superhero, vigilante hero, and even anti-hero supports some aspect of ideology filtered through the American system of life. These systems reflect dilemmas of different marginalized cultures falling within the scope of American values. Those who oppose peace and justice within these cultures represent a struggle between good and evil while having adverse effects those within marginalized cultures.

Chapter 1: The Americanized Superhero

“Superman! Champion of the oppressed, the physical marvel who had sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need!”

--Jerry Siegel, *Action Comics* #1

Superheroes Wear Capes: Superman

Superman is one of the first and most universally recognized superheroes, so much so that the word “super” is shared between both his title and the moniker used to label his fellow heroes and heroines. Since his figure has withstood generations of comic book readers and superhero film-goers, it would be easy to assess his uniform as one of the most commonly recognized stereotypes affiliating the wearer with superhuman abilities, heroic actions, or

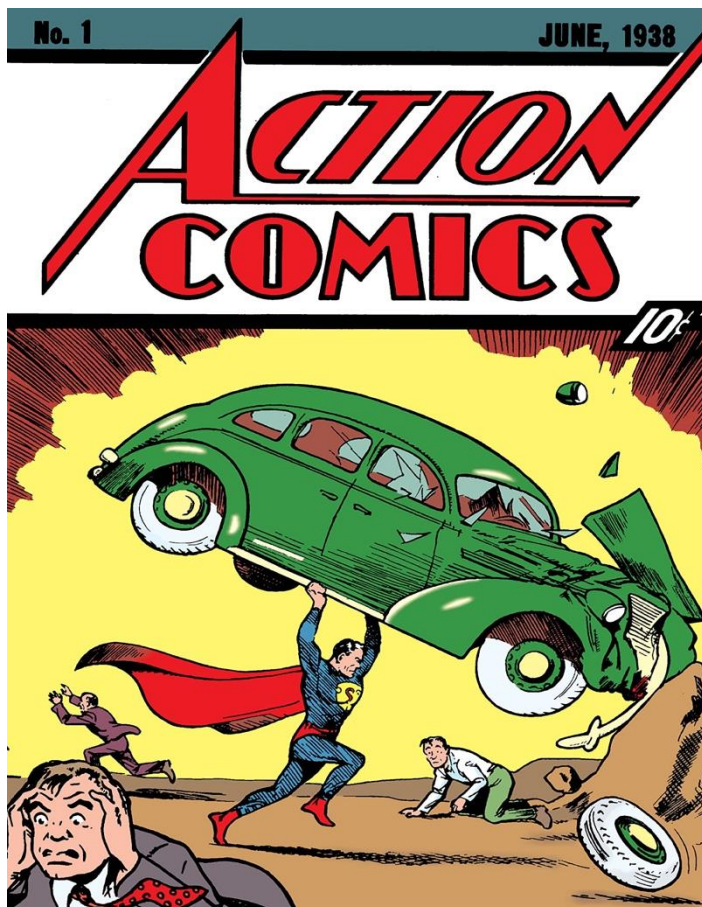


Figure 1 Joe Shuster © DC Comics

affinities for “good”. Perhaps the most iconic of the superheroes’ trademark is the cape. Superman’s red cape serves to indicate a kind of forward progression, while enhancing his stature as the “man of steel”. As the “man of steel”, he spearheads the progression of truth and justice. His cape serves as a means to emphasize this symbolism associated with forward progression. As he smashes a car over his head on the cover of *Action Comics* #1, his rigid muscular body bounds easily forward while his

cape flows freely behind him. It indicates not only forward motion, but forward progress, while emphasizing his strength and ability. The remainder of his skin-tight uniform serves to emphasize his muscular stature, and the symbol on his chest, identifiable as an English “S”, is a symbol associated with his family lineage on his now destroyed home planet of Krypton. The physical description of Superman’s muscular athletic build, form fitting uniform, and billowy cape establishes what has become the most universally recognizable ingredients for a superhero. These ingredients individually represent what Barthes (2012) would refer to as a signifier, while collectively they establish the signified.

Barthes’s (2012) study in semiotics establishes a system of signs and signifiers. In the case of the superhero, the individual physical depictions can be used to determine the overall signifier. Superman’s red billowy cape is the most easily identifiable signifier in the semiological chain. Barthes theorizes that a semiological chain can be broken into a system of signs that are composed of two parts, whereas “it can be seen that in myth there are two semiological systems, one of which is staggered in relation to the other” (Barthes 283). The first order chain creates the signifier and the signified. The signifier relates to an image, writing or language. To this effect, the signifier of the superhero “is at the same time the meaning and the form,” and “as a meaning, the signifier already postulates a reading, I grasp it through my eyes, it has a sensory reality” (Barthes 286). In this case, the cape and tights are established as signifiers to produce the image of the superhero. In a sense, the established image of a muscular man wearing tights and a flowy cape are directly correlated to the superhero and all that the superhero entails. The signified relates to constructs that our mind creates when observing the signifier. In this case, the typical correlation that the mind makes when seeing a picture of a person with a cape are the characteristics of a superhero. In Superman’s case, the signified characteristics are

that of great strength, speed, flight, and protection. The sign is the overall correlation, or end product, between the signifier and the signified.

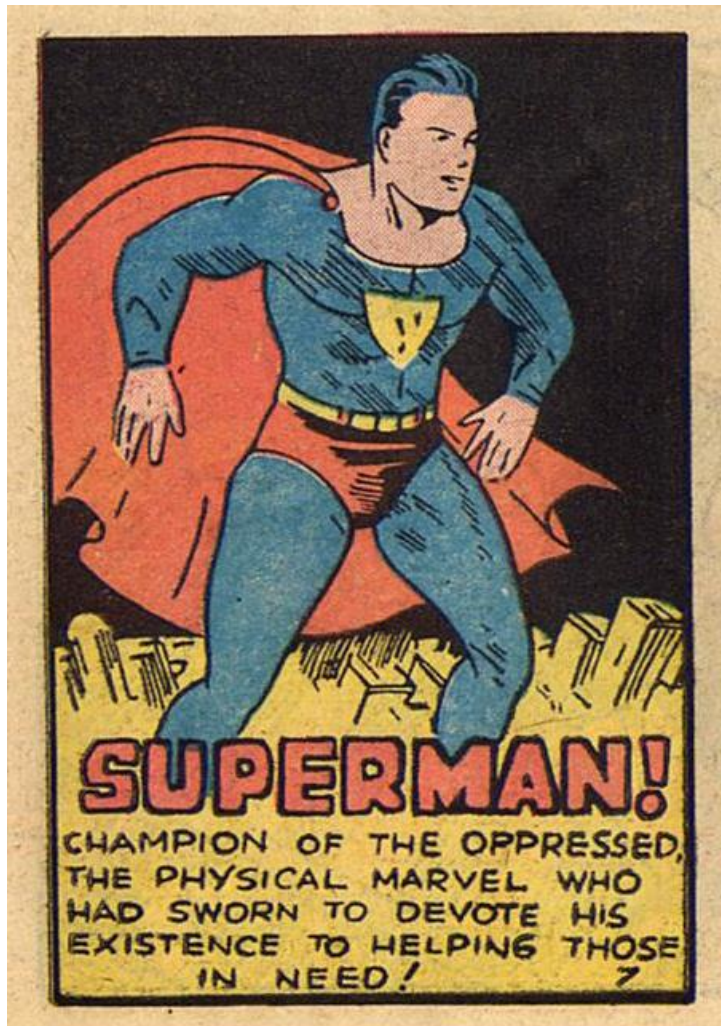


Figure 2 Joe Shuster © DC Comics

appearance, *Action Comics* #1, written by Jerry Siegel and illustrated by Joe Schuster in June 1938, he is depicted in a small pane at the bottom left corner of the first page with a caption that states “champion of the oppressed” as the wind blows his hair and cape back (Siegel 14). This small caption encapsulates and assumes many different ideas. It assumes, first and foremost, that oppression in the United States exists on a scale that requires the intervention of a super-being, a Superman. It does not necessarily state that the oppressors against whom he is dedicated to

The signified, as it applies to Superman, creates a more complex idea in the creation of the semiotic sign. This complex idea highlights Superman as the cure-all for an apparently oppressed society. It indicates a common mass of oppressed people without necessarily indicating who the oppressors are. This, therefore determines that the signified is the pinnacle champion of oppressed Americans, fighting all of America’s enemies. In other words, Superman embodies white American values and institutions. In Superman’s first

fighting against are a localized group. Considering the time of publication, 1 August 1938, merely three months before Hitler invaded Poland, it can be deduced that the oppression is that of a foreign entity or influence, perhaps some force that is un-American. During this period in comic books, the oppressors took the form of spies and covert agents hidden in the government.

This first comic book concludes with Clark Kent, Superman's alter ego, overhearing a senator and a criminal discussing corruption, more specifically, a bill that Senator Barrows is passing to get "our country [...] embroiled with Europe" just before the US's entrance into World War II (Siegel 24). In this context, the sign that is produced by the combination of the signifier and the signified is that of an American superhero dedicated to protecting the American way of life from anyone who would seek to corrupt it. The sign establishes Superman as a purveyor of justice, attempting to prevent involvement in a foreign war. As mentioned earlier, the prevailing image of Superman moving forward with his red cape flowing freely behind him, insinuates that he leaves a trail of freedom and liberty in his wake and further serves as an iconic sign to which his image is usually associated. In accordance with the early American tradition of the red door, the red cape appeals to a welcoming sensation, which would easily fit with his generous smile. Thus, the iconic sign, as developed by Siegel and Schuster, creates a feeling of safety and protection for the oppressed while it creates a feeling of terror for the oppressors.

The second order chain carries with it a more complex meaning or "metalanguage", that is a "second language, in which one speaks about the first" to create a cultural meaning that establishes the myth independently (Barthes 283). This is especially important in the role of the superhero when interpreted as myth. Analyzing the language that carries Superman establishes his character as one possessing seemingly unobtainable virtues and unquestionable morals. One of his more common monikers the "man of steel," is physical, mental, and moral in nature; it

lends to the idea of unwavering values, steadfastness in the face of adversity, and a pillar of justice. He is physically immovable, mentally unchallenged, and morally unquestionable. It is this language that brings him to the precipice of myth.

The sign enables the language of the myth. Recalling Barthes's study in signification, the superhero, like the myth, is offered as a "signifier, being empty, arbitrary offer[ing] no resistance" to the signified (Barthes 293). It is through interpretation of the signified that we realize what is distorted through that which Barthes refers to as "full" or "the meaning" and what is presented as "empty" or "the form" (Barthes 293). To use Barthes's theory, the independent image of Superman represents strength and superhuman ability without any real context. It is a character flying through the air with a cape or lifting a car over his head. Without the context of the superhero's existence, the superhero is just the empty form. The context of Superman's endeavors and what he represents, as depicted in the image above, provides meaning for the superhero and what the superhero represents to the reader. In this way Superman is associated with the values that are attached to the culture of the United States, to truth and justice. He becomes more than a flying fortress of strength, but a superhero with an American agenda. Superman, the image of the superhero or the signifier as empty, projected into an audience and received as a distorted full, develops the metalanguage used in conveying the associative properties of the superhero, whether it be the "man of steel" or defender of justice. However, when considering the language associated with Superman as myth, there are certain cultural codes and connotations that are attached to the context.

His affinities for good and his championing of those in need, carries its own cultural codes and connotations. For Superman, a common cultural code associated with his image is that of a beacon for justice and a purveyor of freedom. The cultural code that Siegel and

Schuster introduced in the first two issues of *Action Comics* exists within a world of bright bustling streets and a growing urban sprawl, Metropolis. In some instances, this imagery represents the American dream, to work hard and earn a good living. The idea of the American dream being associated with Superman is particularly important because Superman himself is an immigrant, thus he represents a success story for immigrants in America. Zizek points out that “the superhero’s psychological monotony is intrinsic to the superhero genre” in “Superheroes: The Making and Unmaking of Genre in a Stupid Culture” in regards to the earlier Superman comics (Zizek 862). It is important to note that the psychological monotony is itself indicative of social progress. When considering Superman’s role as an immigrant, his story of success itself breaks the stereotypical mold of the immigrant’s place in America. The simple term, beacon for justice, insinuates that Superman burns brighter than all his surroundings and that his justice, whether for better or worse, is unavoidable. This produces strong connotative properties for him. These connotative properties most closely associate strong human qualities and moral values with common human characteristics. In other words, humans possessing affinities for unusual moral, mental, or physical strength are sometimes referred to as “superman”. With all of this, Superman also holds tightly to the value of humility, as his alter ego, Clark Kent, a simple bespectacled reporter, is referred to as a “spineless, unbearable, coward” by Lois Lane, his secret love interest (Siegel 20). This helps to distinguish the humility of Superman’s alter ego.

The bright urban sprawl that Superman calls home represents a sense of comfort and positivity in American culture. The glint of windows against skyscrapers in the sunlight and people bustling around the busy streets with business suits represents American capitalism and the American dream to some degree. Superman seeks to protect this way of life and to prevent harm or destruction from coming to the American way of life. In *Action Comics* #2, written by

Jerry Siegel and illustrated by Joe Schuster in July 1938, Superman decides that the heads of two opposing armies are fighting over the sale of munitions. His response to this is to grab the commanders of each opposing army and tell them “I’ve decided to end this war by having you two fight it out between yourselves” rather than have soldiers continue to kill one another (Siegel 38). The first commander responds “but why should we fight” while the other states, “we’re not angry at each other”, and in the end they do not know why they are fighting in the first place (Siegel 39). Though this issue was published before the US officially entered WWII, it resonated with an aversion to warfare, particularly, the soldier on the ground who does not see the larger strategic picture. It captures a sense of peaceful ideology, making the leaders of warring countries fight, rather than sending thousands to their deaths. Making the leaders of each army fight is not completely peaceful in and of itself, but it alludes to alternate means of solving conflict, a means that does not include war, an ideological structure that insists there must be a better way. Superman’s intervention is the mode of presenting the ideological context of peaceful or preventative measures, yet it requires the use of unstoppable moral and physical force. In Daniel Peretti’s book *Superman in Myth and Folklore*, he uses case studies to question “what aspects of [Superman] they admired” to which “the most common response singled out Superman’s morality (Peretti 41). Morality is often indicative of making the right choice, as a preventative measure. Ultimately, Superman is the “daytime” American superhero who seeks to protect through prevention. Although he is an unstoppable force, always moving forward, always progressing, he is still a charismatic figure of comfort and protection.

Some Superheroes Wear Masks: Batman

“Then I heard giant wings flap. It flew down from the sky...its wings were about thirty feet across. It bellowed like...well, I’ve never heard anything like it...”

--Frank Miller, *Batman: Year One*

Conversely, Batman’s world exists in the dark, corrupt, decaying labyrinth of Gotham City. Batman, first appearing in *Detective Comics* #27, May 1939, nearly a year after Superman, follows a similar pattern of superhero uniform. He dons the form-fitting suit, the identifying symbol on his chest, and a cape, which are all the necessary ingredients for the superhero appearance formula. He fights crime, similarly to Superman, and he is feared by criminals and evil-doers, also similar to Superman. Yet, he covers his face and head with a hood in the shape of a bat’s head. This

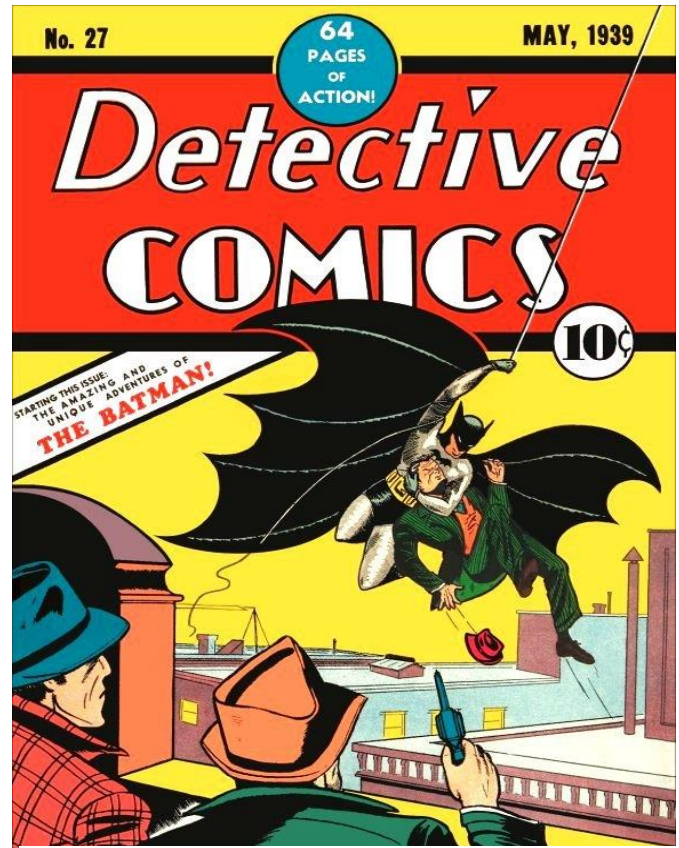


Figure 3 Bob Kane © DC Comics

serves three purposes for him: first, it helps to hide his true identity, much the way Clark Kent’s spectacles hide his true identity, second, it reflects his dark and spooky Gotham surroundings, and third, it strikes fear into the heart of anyone who sees him lurking in the shadows at night, particularly criminals. In some instances, he is not even identifiable as a human, but rather a monster or beast. Conversely, Superman represents the epitome of what an alpha male should look like.

Though Batman bears the traditional signifiers of the superhero, he has stark contrasts to Superman. First, he does not maintain any special or unique superhuman abilities; rather, his true identity, Bruce Wayne, is the heir to fortune who lives outside the city in a mansion. Granted, he trains his body for peak physical condition and is well educated, he ultimately has no greater capability than any other man except his fortune. Batman's signifiers of the superhero



Figure 4 Bob Kane © DC Comics

uniform differ from Superman's portrayal as well. Though they both wear capes, Batman's cape is rigid, pointy, and black, roughly giving

the impression of wings. It is borne of utility and instills the criminals he pursues with fear. In some instances, he uses it to glide down from buildings, giving him the appearance of flying. This, combined with the dark bat mask, serves to strike horror into the heart of criminals and sometimes civilians as well.

From the first semiological chain, Superman and Batman share similar signifiers; however, Batman's dark surroundings and his lack of superhuman ability produce a difference in what is signified. Although Batman is a crime fighter, he is not able to fly across the world and stop wars. Instead, he concentrates his efforts on the more common organized crime syndicates that run rampant in the streets of Gotham. In *Detective Comics* #27, written by Bill Finger and illustrated by Bob Kane in May 1939, he is depicted swinging across a rooftop with a criminal in one arm and a rope in the other while two other gangsters looking on helplessly. Throughout this

issue of *Detective Comics*, he secretly investigates murders that lead to wealthy business owners fighting over a chemical company. In his first few issues, Batman does not seem to possess an aversion to killing and his detective work takes place after the crime has been committed. In *Detective Comics* #1, after he discovers the murderer, the story concludes with the assailant being pushed into a vat of lethal chemicals, to which he responds with “a fitting end for his kind” at the death of the criminal (Finger 17).

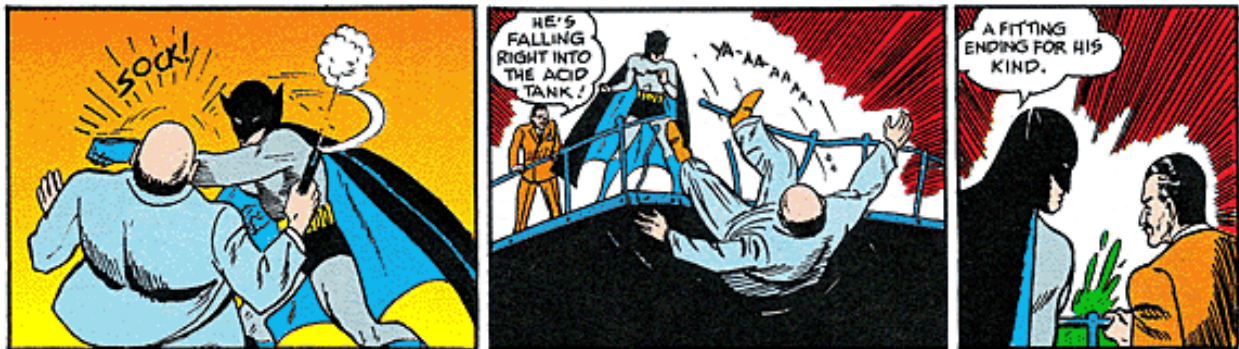


Figure 5 Bob Kane © DC Comics

The signified object in this instance captures a caped crusader who avenges those who are victims of crimes.

In contrast to Superman, what is signified in Batman's character, at least throughout his first few appearances, represents a superhero that concentrates on trying to catch or stop criminals who are already committing crimes, whereas Superman is trying to prevent bad things from happening. In other words, the semiotic sign that would describe Batman is the thing that waits in the night, watching for criminals. His disguise lends to not only the role of the superhero, but something to be feared, a giant bat with giant wings that prowls the dark city looking for criminals. As stated in *Detective Comics* #33, he is “a weird figure [that] races through the night” as he stalks crime (Finger 22). There is no overt statement regarding Batman as a champion for justice or a protector of the oppressed; however, he seeks out criminals,

particularly organized crime throughout his comic books. These signs are what begin to establish the language of Batman as a watcher in the night or even the “dark knight.” Rather than a preventer of conflict, he is an avenger of crime.

The superhero, as represented by the iconic sign of Batman, creates a character that is both similar to and different from Superman. In one sense, they are easily identifiable as superheroes following the presented guidelines of the superhero uniform; however, their similarities tend to be fairly sparse beyond appearance. The language that describes the myth of Superman does not necessarily translate into the same language that would describe Batman. Rather than a beacon of light in a bustling forward progressing city, Batman is portrayed as a creature of the night to beware of. He is not approachable the way Superman is, largely for fear that his secret identity will be discovered, but also because one of his key elements is that he appears out of the darkness and disappears back into the darkness. As stated previously, he is a creature of his surroundings, Gotham City, a dreary city of corruption and overpopulation. These differences determine the characteristics that distinguish Batman and set him apart from Superman.

While Superman’s associative cultural codes invite images of a charismatic protector or preventer of war or atrocity, Batman’s codes signify that of a detective crimefighter or punisher of criminals. As depicted in his first appearance, he is solving a murder mystery, yet in *Detective Comics* #33, he is trying to stop the evil plot of a would-be dictator who idolizes Napoleon Bonaparte, named Dr. Carl Kruger. The artist, Bob Kane, even goes so far as to depict Dr. Kruger dressed like Napoleon sitting in front of a picture of Napoleon. This presses more into the realm of Superman’s cultural codes. Yet, one steadfast connotation that is synonymous with Batman is that of detective. He uses science and technology to adapt to a world of crime that is

evolving more and more elaborate plots to overthrow the city, steal rob a bank, or, in the case of Dr. Kruger, take over the world. The language of the “dark knight” is not quite the same language of the “man of steel.” Although they are both superheroes, they signify different meanings of good and just.

Ideologically, Batman and superman propagate similar qualities represented in American culture, yet their respective means of reinforcing the structures of their ideologies differ. Superman, an alien sent here from the planet Krypton, embodies the qualities of physical and moral perfection in his natural state. As Clark Kent, he represents one of the “oppressed” or weak and in need. The ideology that Superman forwards represents a structure of peace and preventative measures. Using his super powers for good, he is able to circumvent unnecessary bloodshed and, in some instances, stop wars or conflicts from happening. Thus, he represents the ideology of a structured environment, that, when working properly, propagates the advancement of all mankind and can prevent a system from deteriorating with corruption and violence - well, at least all mankind that is associated with the liberties afforded by a republic or democratic government. Batman, on the other hand, is borne of revenge. He is more-so a product of American capitalism, because his seemingly endless resources allow him to fight crime with all of the most technologically advanced gadgets. Because of his wealth, he is afforded the opportunity to moonlight as a caped crusader. Andreas Reichstein’s article “Batman—an American Mr. Hyde,” argues that Batman is “the American answer to the Victorian Fear of losing control” in that “Bruce Wayne can control his evil side” (Reichstein 347). Batman does not display evil tendencies, though his motivations are questionable, his actions ultimately hinder crime. Further, his ability to control his “transformation” is a byproduct of protecting his identity and his lack of superhuman powers. For example, if Bruce

Wayne is wandering around downtown Gotham and is witness to a crime unfolding, he does not immediately jump into action. His response hinges on his ability to change into his uniform and grab his gear. This is not necessarily control per say, but an act of utility and self-preservation. His efforts not only protect citizens from crime and allow them to enjoy civil liberties, but they ensure his place as an independently wealthy bachelor living in a mansion on the outskirts of a teeming city. Ultimately, he is protecting his way of capitalistic life as well as the Gotham citizens.

His agenda forwards combating criminal activities and organized crime, particularly after the crimes have been committed. Where Superman is operating at the strategic and possibly



Figure 6 Levels of War, MCDP 1

operational level of combat, Batman is operating more at the tactical level. *Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1-0* outlines the premises for three levels of war: strategic, involving national policy with a focus on winning wars and maintaining peace, operational, consisting of campaigning and planning phases, and tactical, which involves battle and engagements (MCDP 1-0). Batman's ideologies forward technological advancement and intelligence in solving crimes and mysteries in order to support the justice system. In his world, violent crime

has always existed and always will exist. Accepting this, he chooses to combat it rather than attempt to prevent it. This is a key element in the difference between the tactical level and the strategic level. Whereas the strategic level of war attempts to stop war before it starts, the tactical level is on the ground involved in the conflict. Though the levels overlap, as depicted,

they are significantly different and represent different characteristics within Batman and Superman. These characteristics translate into different levels of effectiveness in regard to symbolizing the superhero. Superman, for example is a superhero that people look forward to seeing in daylight. He is a symbol of justice and peace. He emulates the sturdy structure of a society that forwards peace and liberty. The argument could be made that he is a symbol of the American way of life. He is handsomely depicted as smiling and friendly, while also strong and confident. The strategic level of warfare effectively attempts to accomplish just this. It attempts to maintain peace through diplomacy, stopping wars before they start, and implementing agreements and accords to maintain peace. Batman, on the other hand, is the scary thing in the dark. He does not represent an overarching structure of peace or agreement between conflicting sides. He does not necessarily stop conflicts before they happen, rather, he is the product of conflict in motion. He is the boots on the ground in hand-to-hand combat. He is the tactician, using the city to his advantage and the cover of darkness to enable his attacks. Where Superman's diplomacy fails, Batman's tactics succeed, he prefers fear to love.

Not all Heroes Wear Capes: Captain America

“Join Captain America in his war against the spies and enemies in our midst who threaten our very independence...”

-Timely Publications, *Captain America Comics* #1

Captain America is perhaps one of the most easily recognizable American superhero icons. He is most easily identified by the red, white, and blue colors of his skin-tight uniform.

Combined with these colors are the symbols that make him synonymous with the United States of America.

For example, he wears some form of the “stars and stripes” when combining the red and white vertical stripes encircling his abdomen and a giant white star in the middle of his shield. On his head he wears a partial mask that obscures identity with a giant “A” imprinted on the forehead, to represent America.

Rather than a cape, he wields an indestructible shield. It is here that



Figure 7 Jack Kirby and Joe Simon © Marvel Comics

the semiology of the superhero splits from the traditionally established of caped crusaders.

Captain America’s signifiers are not that different from those of Batman and Superman; in fact, they are a combination of the two. The first and most obvious similarity, as depicted in *Captain America Comics* #1 written by Joe Simon and illustrated by Jack Kirby in March 1941, is the formfitting suit. On the suit are identifying marks such as the “A” on the mask of Captain America. He also bears an identifying symbol on his chest, similar to Batman and Superman, only his is a giant white star to go with his red and white stripes and solid blue leggings. Like

Batman, he wears a mask to protect his identity, at least in the early comics. In *Captain America Comics* #1 he is introduced as Private Steve Rogers, his true identity, and sneaks away from his field camp or barracks to become Captain America. He also shares the masculine athletic physical stature of Superman and Batman; however, unlike Batman, he does possess some super powers that were given to him for the explicit purpose of becoming a super-soldier for the United States Army. A signifier that he does not share with Superman or Batman is his shield. His shield, decorated with the colors of the American flag, serves as a weapon and protection during his skirmishes. He is not depicted as using a weapon; however he does throw his shield at adversaries in a boomerang-like manner. Though it seems to be borne of utility, it symbolizes a nation's protection, being wielded by the same nation's protector. Much the same way Superman's cape symbolizes freedom and Batman's cape adds to his creaturelike persona, the shield symbolizes both protection and force.

Like Batman and Superman, Captain America is first and foremost a superhero. Also, like Batman and Superman, he represents the attributes of values and morals. However, "unlike his fellow heroes", Jason Bainbridge argues in "The Call to Justice": Superheroes, Sovereigns and the State During Wartime", that "Captain America was pure propaganda" (Bainbridge 755). This is actually fairly difficult to argue against, as he was created to become the first American "super soldier" explicitly affiliated with the military and American ideologies. He often finds himself getting involved in American political matters overseas, as shown in the cover of his first appearance punching Adolph Hitler in his face in front of Hitler's top men in Germany. What's more, this issue was printed roughly eight months before the US entered World War II. The sign created by the signifier and the signified of Captain America evolves into an iconic sign for America and American values during the World War II period.

The metalanguage that is developed within the second semiological chain establishes a very pro-Americanized way of thinking. Captain America actively seeks to get involved on the US's behalf in all political and military matters. Joe Simon and Jack Kirby's representation of Captain America depicts him battling villains who are trying to infiltrate the government. As stated previously, this period focused heavily on stopping the influence of spies from other governments, particularly governments that did not practice capitalism. All of Captain America's enemies in his first two issues are bent on world domination and overthrowing the American government. His original creation story involves a spy disguised as an old lady who infiltrates a secret lab where Steve Rogers is being tested on. The spy rips off his mask just as Captain America is created and shouts "death to the dogs of democracy" before firing a silenced semiautomatic pistol at the doctor who created the superhero (Kirby 17). This single act sets the tone for the next two issues of *Captain America Comics* as Captain America seeks those who oppose democracy or the American way of life. Captain America's metalanguage is imbedded in American ideals and creates connotations and cultural codes that associate him with Americanism throughout history. The examples of this are a steady progression of Captain America fighting spies all throughout *Captain America Comics* #1. The ultimate patriot is represented not only in the red, white, and blue uniform that Captain America wears, but in his efforts affiliated with the military to thwart foreign infiltration of the American government.

The ultra-patriotic Americanism that Captain America purports establishes him as a force to be reckoned with, should a foreign entity cross paths with the American way of life. In fact, the majority of his foes throughout his first two issues bear the Nazi symbol. Red Skull in particular, sports a jumpsuit with a Swastika emblazoned on the chest. Though not a spy, Red Skull wears a disguising mask and tries to hypnotize his victims before injecting them with a

poison that causes death instantaneously. He tells his victims to “look into [his] eyes” and “peer into death” in order to distract them from the fatal needle (Kirby 53). Red Skull not only symbolizes death, but the red of communism or fascism, and the hypnotic eyes represent a distraction that ultimately leads to compromise or demise. This is a perfect example of communist ideas that Captain America, and probably most Americans of the time period, were fighting against. Thus, the cultural codes that are associated with Captain America are most easily identified as the social structures attached to the democracy and capitalistic ideals of the United States. The connotative properties that can most easily be identified with Captain America are freedom and liberty. In *Captain America Comics* #1 there is an ad for membership in “Captain America’s Sentinels of liberty,” an opportunity to “join Captain America in his war against the spies and enemies in our midst who threaten our very independence” (Kirby 19). Bainbridge notes that “in this way Captain America was an unproblematic celebration of the interventionist physicality of the superhero”, with regard to the recruitment of young readers in pushing the politics of American interventionist ideals (Bainbridge 755). Bainbridge’s assessment also associates Captain America with the operational level of warfare as it involves campaigning and planning (MCDP 1-0). Not only was Captain America acting within the tactical level of warfare, personally intervening in ground tactics, but he was campaigning for a younger generation to get involved with America’s pursuit to end communism. Captain America’s agenda is not really hidden or hard to pick out, and his ideology follows.

The image of Captain America conveys a sense of patriotic American ideology and suggests that the United States is a friendly structuralized establishment that is also a pillar of strength and power. The imagery of the ultra-patriotic superhero appeals to a sense of American values that is associated with capitalistic ideals during the World War II period. Captain

America serves as a branch of enforcement for these values, pushing America's agenda throughout the world with force and military tactics. The use of his dominance to assert authority over others is translated into the forceful implementation of American ideology and agenda. Thus, the superhero's actions become associated with a message that is correlated to justice, specifically dominant and forceful American justice. In this same example, Captain America is often seen to be overpowering or strategically outthinking the enemy, who is most often opposed to Americanized freedoms or ways of life.

The ideology of Americanism exists among Batman, Superman, and Captain America. Each fight for the civil freedoms that America calls its own in different ways and with different sets of powers. Whether it is Batman using critical thinking and gadgets to stop criminals, Superman flying across the world to stop a war or Captain America rooting out spies, they all forward an agenda of very American liberties and freedoms. Batman, his wealth being a product of American capitalism, protects his American way of life through combating organized crime. Captain America's agenda is a little easier to spot than Batman's, but they are both there and they all hold values and abide by codes that set them apart from a crowd of regular people. They always watch, always listen, are always there to thwart the next big wave of organized crime, or a nuclear missile hurdling towards New York, or spies seeking to overthrow the government. They all have this in common; they are heroes with an agenda, an American agenda.

Chapter 2: Vigilantism and Cultural Representations

“The noir hero is a knight in blood caked armor. He's dirty and he does his best to deny the fact that he's a hero the whole time.”

--Frank Miller

Systems that Birth Vigilantes

In order to establish a space for heroes to exist, there must be the devolution of a structure. This could be a physical structure, like that of a burning building, a societal structure, which would include the justice system, or a sociopolitical or socioeconomic structure, which could encapsulate everything from race to wealth. The example of the burning building is explained easily enough; there are people trapped in a burning building and the hero selflessly rushes in to save them. Here, the context of the fire is not taken into consideration, only that the hero decides to risk life and limb to save others. The societal structure becomes slightly less obvious as it involves structures set in place by governments and government officials. In this instance, the breakdown may occur due to a corrupt society or the corruption of officials who govern the society. This scenario also includes organized crime as it proposes highly organized and structured opposition to established government. However, the breakdown in societal structures is not only a product of a corrupt legal system or law enforcement; it may also exist within a society that lacks proper funding or training for law enforcement.

The lack of properly trained law enforcement officers or the existence of ill-chosen ones creates gaps in the protection and civil order of a community or society. The legal system that supports this law enforcement would in turn fall short of maintaining civil order and justice in a society such as this. Matthew Costello and Kent Worcester's article “The Politics of the

Superhero” examines the environment in which the stories “depict and sometimes deconstruct the boundary between the law and lawlessness” (Costello and Worcester 86). In their article, they discuss how these stories “sometimes embrace the idea that the state is an instrument of legitimate authority” but that “they often express the ambivalence and even hostility that many citizens feel toward their own government” (Costello and Worcester 86). To this effect, the superhero, or in this case, the vigilante gets involved where they interpret the breakdown exists. Examples of improperly funded or corrupt law enforcement and legal systems are typically associated with communities of lower socioeconomic status or in cases where there is a vast separation between the wealthy and the struggling class. The gaps created in justice systems that are supported by flawed or corrupt structures coincide the socioeconomically and socio-politically marginalized communities. Often, districts that are overrun with crime and corruption are synonymous with the socioeconomically marginalized. Within the universe of the superhero, these gaps in the justice system are filled with the actions of the vigilante, an individual who takes it upon him/herself to serve their own sense of justice on criminals or criminal activity.

Superheroes, as a matter of definition, are not typically associated with any legal or publicly recognized justice system. Costello and Worcester note that “superheroes regularly interfere with the normal prerogatives of the state” which would “imply[ing] that the legal processes are insufficient, and perhaps even that inner-directed morality is superior to other-directed legality”, thus creating the need for the vigilante (Costello and Worcester 86). The vigilante does not necessarily follow any standardized law enforcement procedures, and their levels of violence or means of criminal apprehension do not often coincide with any established justice system. For these reasons, the superhero must have a secret identity. Having a secret identity protects the person behind the mask from the reprisal of criminals, but more importantly,

keeps them out of trouble with the law. In a society that requires the assistance of a superhero to maintain some semblance of law, order, and balance, the role of the vigilante checking “unbridled or unregulated power” becomes more apparent (Costello and Worcester 86). What drives the vigilante is not the promise of a paycheck or even the praise of the weak or helpless. Often, the vigilante has a personal stake in serving their own version of justice to the criminal element. It is a system or code that they live by, and in the superhero culture, the object of their actions is to rid the streets of those who would seek to do harm to others. The vigilante sees an opportunity to correct a deficiency in a social structure, and they execute by means outside of the legal scope. The superhero vigilante is often a victim of a violent crime. In the mind of a vigilante, the justice system was not there when they needed it to be; criminals get away with crimes and have no one to answer to. The vigilante superhero is simply performing a duty that the justice system is either unable or unwilling to deal with. In their own mind, they are not heroes and often do not want to be considered heroes. Humility, a trait shared by many superheroes, is an understatement for the vigilante. In this chapter, I will be analyzing the vigilante actions of Batman and the Punisher.

Who is Batman’s Enemy?

Batman is different from the traditional superheroes, such as Superman and Captain America, because he is motivated by personal vengeance rather than altruistic intentions. In *Batman: Year One*, written by Frank Miller and illustrated by David Mazzucchelli May 1987, the masked avenger initiates his journey into the dark world of Gotham City criminals in order to correct a wrong committed against his family when he was a child. Batman, Bruce Wayne, witnessed his parents’ murder in a dark alley shortly after leaving the theater when he was a small child. It is a murder that he witnesses personally, a murder that strikes close to home, a

murder that goes unsolved. The system that is in place during the time of this murder is broken and flawed. Though he lives in a mansion on the outskirts of Gotham City, his wealth affords him the opportunity to involve himself in combating criminal activity in the dark, dreary, and overcrowded streets of the city. As mentioned in Chapter 1, both Bruce Wayne and Batman are products of a capitalistic society. His wealth and status in Gotham are a product of his parents' fortune. This allows him to sleep during the day and keep watch during the night. The gap in the societal structure of Gotham City gives him purpose as a crime fighter, avenger, and vigilante. This gap is ultimately what led to the death of his parents, as they were robbed and murdered in a dark and decaying part of Gotham City. This, in turn, sparks both lament and vengeance for Bruce Wayne. Further, this gap in societal structure reflects the separation of the socioeconomically marginalized and the socioeconomically privileged the latter of which Bruce Wayne belongs to. The socioeconomic gap subsequently leads to an inability to identify with marginalized society of Gotham City's streets. Witnessing the violent murder of his parents forms a predisposition to violence at a young age, and instills him with a severe sense of vengeance. Mike DuBose points out in "Holding Out for a Hero: Reaganism, Comic Book Vigilantes, and Captain America" that Batman "remains the vigilante proper because he never compromised his crime-fighting methods to satisfy the government" (DuBose 922). This remains true for Batman throughout Miller's representation and does not waver even with the retirement of James Gordon. He is either trying to avenge the murder of his parents by putting a stop to crime on his own terms, or he is trying to prevent similar crimes from affecting other Gotham citizens.

The socioeconomic gap that keeps Bruce Wayne from being able to identify with the marginalized citizens of Gotham causes Batman to react to criminals and criminal activity in

overly violent actions. Batman inserts himself into the crime syndicate by allowing himself to blend into the night. He appears out of the darkness and disappears back into the darkness just as quickly. However, because of the socioeconomic gap between him and the citizens he protects in the streets, he is not a product of the dark streets. Ultimately, there is always the respite of returning to his mansion on the hill. His association with the streets of Gotham exists as a means of dealing with the loss of his parents. He does not fight crime as a means of survival or with the intention of receiving any accolades. He presents himself as a dark and scary figure to those who would oppose him and those who he is protecting. Batman's disassociation with the lower-class society of Gotham positions him as an outsider among the socioeconomically marginalized, and although he attempts to help them through fighting crime, he cannot fully associate himself with them. In fact, he knowingly crusades throughout the darkness of the city, presenting himself as a creature to both civilian and criminal alike. In Chuck Tate's article, "An Appetite for Destruction: Aggression and the Batman", he notices that Batman "dresses like a giant bat to scare the criminals he ambushes and beats into submission" (Tate 113). Analyzing possible psychological motives for the superhero's actions, Tate notes that Batman "derives pleasure from the activity of scaring and hurting criminals, a different sort of pleasure than that of knowing that someone was helped" (Tate 113). Tate keys in on an important characteristic that separates the vigilantism of Batman from the daytime superhero status of Superman: Superman wants people to like him and feel comfortable with him; he wants to be known as a protector of the weak. In contrast, Batman simply wants to punish criminals; people "being helped is a *consequence*, not a motivation" for the creature of the night (Tate 114). Batman spends his life separated from the lower-class victims of Gotham City and therefore cannot relate to them enough to act on protection as a motivation for his crusades.

Wayne displays a general mistrust of common Gotham citizens and tends to make character generalizations that do not indicate a separation between socioeconomically marginalized and street criminals. In *Batman: Year One*, Bruce Wayne makes a generalization regarding the people, both criminal and civilian, of Gotham city from the comfort of a first-class airplane cabin, which further creates a socioeconomic gap between Batman and the people of Gotham. Bruce Wayne is traveling back to Gotham City from a trip overseas while then Lieutenant Detective Gordon is traveling simultaneously to Gotham Police Department via public transit to meet the commissioner he will soon be working for. The contrast between the two characters creates a distance between Batman and the soon-to-be police commissioner. This distance symbolizes the socioeconomic gap that exists within the Gotham City society. In this scenario the superhero is flying in from a personally funded overseas trip thinking to himself “I should have taken the train, should be closer” and “I should see the enemy” (Miller 2). This is the most blatant example of Wayne’s generalization regarding the people of Gotham; there is no distinction between the common people of Gotham and what Wayne considers the enemy. In the parallel scenario, Gordon thinks to himself “train’s no way to come to Gotham...in an airplane from above, all you’d see is the streets and buildings [...] fool you into thinking it’s civilized” as he sits packed into a public city train (Miller 2). Here Wayne’s generalization of the enemy includes Gordon, who is not a criminal, yet riding the train. The vigilante hero sits in comfort, separate from “the enemy” who is on the train below, while Gordon sits in the train wishing he was in an airplane (Miller 2). In Wayne’s generalization of the population who are both physically below him as well as socioeconomically beneath him, he does not differentiate between the civilian population and the criminal element; he simply suggests that anyone who is destined to take the train is the potential enemy, his enemy. Further, while he has the luxury or

hindsight, Gordon, a legal crime fighter, is not afforded the same luxury as he enters Gotham City.

The socioeconomic gap between Batman and the civilian population of Gotham City foreshadows his interactions with the residents of Gotham City throughout Frank Miller's graphic novel. Todd Phillips's 2019 film *Joker* does this as well. It establishes a steep income inequality within the city. In the film, Bruce Wayne's father, Thomas Wayne, is depicted as a wealthy politician and business owner who is more concerned with his career than helping the people he is supposed to be representing. Ultimately, he and his wife are killed during the riots near the end of the film. The murder is pointedly a discriminatory killing by a rioter wearing a clown mask. The killer finds Thomas Wayne in the alley and says, "Hey Wayne, you get what you fuckin' deserve," just before shooting him and his wife (Phillips 2019). The rioters are predominantly the socioeconomically underprivileged, and the riot is essentially the symbol of revolt against the wealthy sparked by Arthur Fleck, the Joker, who is also socioeconomically marginalized and mentally ill.

Bruce Wayne and Batman further separate themselves from the citizens of Gotham by creating more generalizations and associations between the socioeconomically marginalized and criminals. As the story develops in *Batman: Year One*, Wayne decides to go on a reconnaissance mission to scout the territory for criminals. As he is readying himself with a disguise, he states that all his costume "requires is a change of clothes and complexion" as he changes the color of his skin and makes the "twenty block walk to the enemy camp" through the streets of Gotham city (Miller 9-10). Again, he openly refers to the socioeconomically marginalized inhabitants of Gotham City as the "enemy". To this effect, Bruce Wayne is unable to identify with the common people of the city. Because of this, it becomes apparent that he is not only unable to

identify with common or less fortunate people but also considers them to be, in large part, criminals. He is searching for the element that killed his parents, looking to punish criminals, not to save innocents. As Tate discusses, “Batman focuses almost exclusively on the predators, not the victims”, it becomes more and more clear that Batman, the vigilante, is out for revenge through intimidation and violence against his foes (Tate 113). With this analysis, Batman is planted firmly in the realm of vigilante.

Representing Gotham City

Miller’s depiction of Gotham city criminals, city officials, police force, and common citizens are all cast in a semi-negative light or at least with many flaws. As Miller’s creation story of Batman evolves, the vigilante begins to test skills on smaller time criminals. His first interaction with criminals as Batman takes place on a fire escape with what appears to be ethnic teens trying to steal a television set. As they stare up at him in terror, Batman thinks to himself, “The costume works better than I’d hoped” (Miller 39). This is reflective of Tate’s suggestion that Batman uses intimidation and scare tactics against criminals. Throughout the course of Miller’s graphic novel, Batman turns his attention to the corruption within the police department. The upper-class society is indistinguishable from organized criminals and government officials in this scenario. This paints the effects of a corrupt system which, as discussed earlier, is where vigilantism is most active. Batman is setting himself up to give a warning to all the corruption in the city by infiltrating a dinner party attended by the police commissioner and the boss of the organized crime syndicate of Gotham City. The depiction of Gotham’s police commissioner and the head crime boss distinguishes them as pasty-complexioned and greedy, over-indulgent individuals. As Batman crashes the dinner party, he states, “you’ve eaten Gotham’s wealth [...] its spirit [...] your feast is nearly over”, indicating that their corruption and criminal activity will

not escape his vigilance (Miller 46). Representations of Gotham City's population does not seem to escape negative characterization.

Miller also casts the parallel heroic figures of James Gordon and Selina Kyle with negative properties. Lieutenant Detective Gordon ultimately becomes Batman's confidant and is trying to rid the police department of corruption. However, he is painted with flaws as well; his most notable characteristic is his affair on his pregnant wife with a female coworker (Miller 68). Selina Kyle, better known as Cat Woman, to make a life for herself and her young charge, resorts to prostitution and burglary. She steals from the police commissioner, whose most valuable items are pop memorabilia, which is another reflection of the frivolous nature of the upper class in Gotham City (Miller 91). Where Kyle needs money to feed herself and the young lady she takes care of, she cannot even accomplish this by stealing from the wealthy. In Miller's version of Gotham, the entire city is dirty, corrupt, or frivolous. The final chapter of *Batman: Year One* begins with the epigram "He's out to clean up a city that likes being dirty" and also states that "he can't do it alone", leading the reader to believe that he will need the help of Lieutenant Gordon (Miller 81). Ultimately, the story ends up including Cat Woman, Gordon, and Batman working somewhat together to clean up crime. The citizens, government, criminals, and police force in Gotham City are all represented with great flaws.

The Punisher's Vigilante Justice

The Punisher's role within the superhero universe draws some similar visual characteristics to the traditional superhero, yet his cold and violent actions towards criminals and the vengeance of his murdered family represent that of the vigilante. The Punisher, like Batman, has no superhuman abilities. He is similar to Captain America in that he is a war veteran and that he does not wear a cape. He shares almost no similarities with Superman other

than the traditional skin-tight suit. He wears a black suit with white gloves, boots, and belt. He also wears a giant white skull on his chest which identifies him as the Punisher. The skull is also representative of parting with his past life as a father and a husband. That part of him is dead, and its place is only death and punishment. The stark black and white suit is also reflective of his outlook on fighting crime: one is either good or bad, nothing really in between. He has black hair and is always heavily armed. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, he is the product of the breakdown in a

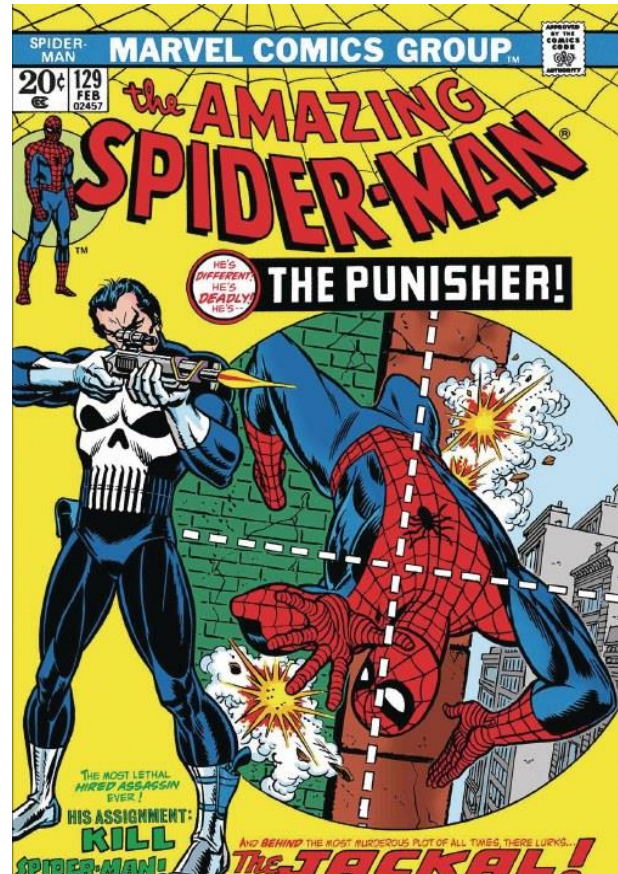


Figure 8 John Romita © Marvel Comics

societal structure. His wife and child are murdered in central park through a crossfire with organized crime, and he vows vengeance on all criminals. His first appearance on the cover of *The Amazing Spider-Man* # 129, written by Jerry Conway and illustrated by John Romita Sr in February 1974, shows him firing a machine gun at Spider-Man. The image of the Punisher firing an assault rifle with Spider-Man, a known friendly superhero, in the cross-hairs creates a provoking situation in which the superhero is being attacked by a villain who is actually a vigilante with similar goals.

From the Punisher's first appearance in comic books, he is labeled as a killer rather than a hero or even a vigilante. In *The Amazing Spider-Man* #129, Frank Castle, the Punisher, has teamed up with a villain called the Jackal, who convinces Frank Castle that Spider-Man is a

killer for murdering Norman Osborne, who is also the Green Goblin. During the Punisher and the Jackal's initial conversation the Jackal tells the Punisher "you like the death—the killing—the joyful revenge", to which the Punisher replies, "I kill only those who deserve killing, Jackal," which immediately sets the stage for the Punisher's heavy-handed form of black and white justice (Conway 3). The Punisher's form of vigilante justice means killing those who he believes deserve to be killed.

The Punisher's small-time vigilante standpoint is often questioned and rejected by other superheroes, particularly the symbol of American freedom and security, Captain America whose agenda and values are usually purported more important than other superheroes. If nothing else, the Punisher is a good tactician. He expertly dispatches those he deems to be criminals. It is of note that he had a very successful career as a Marine Captain during the Vietnam War. While Captain America was a product of World War II, a time when the United States was unified in fighting the Nazi evil, Frank Castle's War was significantly different from Captain America's war. In the graphic novel *Civil War: A Marvel Comics Event* written by Mark Millar and penciled by Steven McNiven January 2007, Captain America lets the Punisher on his reduced Avengers team. He essentially uses Frank Castle's covert operative skills to break into the Baxter building where new superheroes are being created by S.H.I.E.L.D. Captain America decides that letting the Punisher onto the team was a mistake when the Punisher murders two supervillains who were trying to join forces with Captain America. Captain America persists in beating on Frank Castle; however, Castle will not fight back, simply stating "not against you" while Captain America keeps ordering Castle to fight back (Millar 148). Spider-Man makes the comment "Cap's probably the reason he went to Vietnam [...] same guy, different war", to which Captain America responds "wrong [...] Frank Castle is insane," which draws an

interesting correlation between the two war veterans (Millar 148). This same story is retold with a flashback in *Civil War: Punisher War Journal*, written by Matt Fraction and Illustrated by Mike Deodato in 2007. In this instance, Captain America is still beating the Punisher up for murdering supervillains; however, the Punisher is flashing back to a time at Camp Lejeune when Captain America visited his platoon and ordered Castle to try and hit him, to which Castle responded, “No sir, I really don’t think I can do that”, similar to Castle’s current situation (Fraction 59). This exchange between Captain America and the Punisher is indicative of a subordinate relationship between the marginalized, portrayed by the Vietnam War veteran Frank Castle, and the ultra-patriotic American super soldier Captain America. This exchange also insinuates that Captain America’s values and priorities are more significant than that of a common vigilante.

Although Captain America tends to “fight the righteous fight” for freedom and democracy, his tactics and values sometimes require the aid of lesser heroes who have questionable morals of values. Throughout the exchange between Captain America and the Punisher in *Civil War: Punisher War Journal*, Castle reminds Captain America of his need for vigilantes like him. As Captain America is striking Frank Castle, Castle says, “You needed someone to do the dirty work when the time came.” Captain America’s response is, “Shut your mouth soldier,” as he continues to punish the Punisher (Fraction 61). This small exchange between the symbol of American democracy and military righteousness and a Vietnam War veteran turned vigilante signifies a distinct relationship between the marginalized cultures and Americanism. First of all, let’s remember that Captain America and Frank Castle fought in very different wars. The veterans of World War II came home to welcoming parades and an economy that was embracing them with open arms. There was a distinct winner and a distinct loser in

World War II, and America celebrated its victors. Vietnam War veterans, on the other hand, had no distinct end to their war; there was no parade; in fact, there were protests in the streets. There was no clear winner and no clear loser for the United States in Vietnam. It is also important to understand that American forces in World War II were banded together to fight a common evil, rather than the political unrest that many Americans felt about the involvement of U.S. forces in Vietnam. The Vietnam war did not have a common or clearly identifiable enemy for the U.S., rather American soldiers were fighting against the idea of communism.

The United States was attacked at Pearl Harbor and subsequently entered World War II. In Vietnam, however, U.S. involvement was something that was questioned by the public from the beginning. President Kennedy pledged that South Vietnam wouldn't succumb to communism, and so the United States appeared to be fighting communism. Some of the surrounding circumstances spoke of turmoil within the United States government. It was essentially a 20-year war which spanned the terms of five presidents, one of which, President Kennedy, was assassinated during that time. There was great civil unrest in the United States during this time because of racial inequality. One of our nation's greatest visionaries, Dr. Martin Luther King was also assassinated during this time, and Lyndon B. Johnson was rapidly losing popularity. The General overseeing the war in Vietnam, General Westmoreland, was relieved of command halfway through his term. America was essentially on the brink of a civil war and all of it was being televised. Captain America and the Punisher's violent exchange during both issues of *Civil War*, tell of an American empire that uses the youth of its country to fight in political wars. The American empire is represented by Captain America, who uses the Punisher to do its dirty work. The Punisher represents the youth of America who willfully obeys its government and sacrifices itself to the furnace of foreign wars. These same youths are easily

discarded by their government and left with darkness in their hearts. This is where American ideology is forced to confront some of the darkness that it creates.

While Captain America's post-war philosophy was in line with keeping the peace and sanctity of the United States democracy, Frank Castle's was somewhat different. He had a quieter homecoming, as most did at the conclusion of the Vietnam War. He was looking forward to a quiet lifestyle with his wife and child in New York. His transformation into a superhero and a vigilante was the product of tragedy. It should not seem surprising, given the differences in the surrounding circumstances between World War II and the Vietnam War, that Captain America resorted to keeping American democracy at the forefront of the world, while the Punisher resorted to vigilantism. In Andrew R. Getzfeld's article "What Would Freud Say? Psychopathology and the Punisher," he observes the Punisher's behavior stating that "Castle demonstrates a lack of empathy, inflated and arrogant self-appraisal, and glib and superficial charm", while also pointing out that he has "no emotional bonds with others" in an attempt to diagnose Castle's psychopathology (Getzfeld 136). Though Getzfeld's views are compelling, he doesn't seem to consider any of the surrounding circumstances relating to the time period in which the Punisher was created.

The role of the vigilante seems to be a very lonely one. Batman spends the majority of his life in relative solitude with only the company of Alfred in his giant estate outside of Gotham City. His only family was taken from him during a murder on the streets of Gotham, and his vigilantism takes on the form of a masked crime fighter. The Punisher also lost his family to murder. His form of justice is borne of extreme violence and hatred. He has vowed to his murdered wife Maria that he will avenge her death by killing criminals. He, like Batman, has no friends and lacks any real personal connection with the civilian population. This difference

signifies a shift in the moral righteousness of the traditional superheroes and creates a space for the vigilante hero who often does not conduct their self in a manner that is socially acceptable.

Chapter 3: The Antihero and Ideology

“It has occurred to me that the superhero really only has originated in America. That seems to be the only country that has produced this phenomenon”

--Alan Moore

Where Anti-heroes Fit In

The open denial of the role of superhero by the vigilante insinuates that the vigilante hero encompasses the values of the anti-hero. The anti-hero does not admit to being a hero and in fact, does not want to be considered a hero. The anti-hero also acts outside of the traditional boundaries of the hero, often incorporating an extreme form of punishment and a skewed sense of justice. Where the hero's justice typically aligns with the law, the anti-hero's justice is very far removed from the legal system. The anti-hero walks a thin line between hero and villain. The key differentiation between the anti-hero and the villain is the agenda of the character; whether the crime is being used as a means to punish a criminal or used to suppress an innocent. The Punisher is a prime example of the anti-hero, while the Joker, clearly a villain, acts in a manner which is similar to the anti-hero. His murderous actions coincide more readily with the actions of a villain than a hero. While the traditional hero acts in a manner that is socially acceptable and seems to have some semblance of a moral code, the anti-hero acts far outside of what is socially accepted of a hero. The vigilante actions of the Punisher allow him to take the role of the anti-hero because he does not let the law stop him from killing criminals. Batman mainly puts his criminals away in Arkham Asylum, or at least makes an honest effort to do so, the Punisher makes zero effort. He prefers his criminals to be dead. For this reason, the Punisher is considered not only a vigilante, but an anti-hero.

The icons on the Punisher associate him with violent action. All of the superheroes discussed here have symbols that represent different things. Superman has a giant S on his uniform, which is the symbol for hope on his home planet; Batman has the symbol of the bat, to represent the darkness in which he thrives; and Captain America has the star on his chest along with an A on his head to represent the United States. The Punisher has the symbol of the skull on his uniform. The Punisher's symbol, while primarily a focal point for shooters as it covers his body armor, is a symbol that separates him from other superheroes and vigilantes. It represents death and, similar to Batman's entire costume, is supposed to strike fear into his foes. He also does not wear a cape, which is similar to Captain America; however, his choice not to wear a cape more closely associates him with the civilian population or common people. Captain America uses a shield to represent the protection of the United States, shielding his country and ideologies from all others, while the Punisher wields no obvious source of protection. His weapons are quite simply firearms and tactics. He is a person of the streets and does not hold himself above any other person, and, most importantly, does not claim to be any sort of hero or role model.

The Punisher and Ideology

Within the universe that the Punisher inhabits, there is good and there is bad. Good is allowed to go on living and bad is dealt with severely. Castle considers Captain America "a character different guys play so America never has to go without a fighting spirit" and that he is "a symbol" and an "ideal" (Fraction 67). The Punisher's consideration of Captain America further distinguishes the anti-hero vigilante from the superhero. This quote considers that the ideology behind the symbol of superheroes represents a timelessness that is unobtainable by a common man or woman. It is a set of values or morals that are influenced by Americanism, as

discussed in Chapter 1, the U.S. justice system, and America's democracy. This value system establishes the agenda of American idealism as it relates to peace, capitalism, and justice. It also suggests that the agenda of the superhero is shaped and influenced by Americanized ideological contexts that set the superhero on a pedestal for everyone to emulate. The anti-hero disagrees with the processes identified within the justice system and the ideology that supports it.

The Punisher also points out in *Civil War: Punisher War Journal* that superheroes do not live in the real world. As the Punisher is considering his place within the graphic novel, he thus describes the superheroes: "that tweaked blood gets into the brain and all that power makes 'em believe they have the right to tell anyone how to live" (Fraction 24). Though he is still somewhat on the side of the superheroes in this graphic novel, he stops to consider what sets him apart from them. The entire premise of *The Punisher Kills the Marvel Universe*, written by Garth Ennis and penciled by Doug Braithwaite in November 1995, revolves around the superiority complexes of superheroes, their personal agenda, and their self-appointed righteousness that allows them to decide what is best for the common people. In this comic book, Frank Castle's family is a casualty of superheroes fighting amongst themselves and against supervillains. Castle's transformation into the Punisher revolves around killing all superheroes. This is a more direct approach to the conflict between the anti-hero and superheroes. After he has murdered all of the superheroes except Dare Devil, in his final fight scene with Dare Devil, the Punisher admits, "I killed a bunch of arrogant scums" (Ennis 44). The Punisher goes on to say, "you hide behind your masks and you think you've got the right to kick the world into the shape you want it to be – and too bad if anyone says different", as he tricks Dare Devil into edging closer (Ennis 44). Here is an example of the anti-hero challenging the ideologies of the superhero, the ideologies of American culture as a dominant world force.

The Punisher rejects superheroes' ideologies and takes an unpopular stance against them, only to be associated with murderers and villains. Again, in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #135, written by Jerry Conway and illustrated by John Romita Sr 1974, the Punisher questions the superhero ideology. After Spider-Man rants on about what a bad man the Tarantula is as he defeats him, the Punisher shows up and asks, "Do you believe all that, wall-crawler?" and "Are you truly that ... idealistic?" regarding Spider-Man's speech to the Tarantula (Conway 19). Without missing a beat, Spider-Man replies, "Yeah, I'm idealistic – and I'll stay idealistic until something better comes along." He proceeds to ask, "What about you, Punisher? Don't you have any ideals?" to which the Punisher replies, "I did – once," and refuses to talk further about it (Conway 19). The Punisher must take the form of the anti-hero in order to challenge American ideologies. Though this is not the only reason he takes on the role of the anti-hero, he uses this role to his benefit to fuel his murderous rampage against crime.

American ideology carries with it some semblance of an agenda. In John McGuire's dissertation *With us or Against us? Hegemony and Ideology within American Superhero Comic Books 2001-2008*, he states that "at the core of America's ideology is its belief in its own superiority, its uniqueness, a celebration of competition and success; a manifest destiny" in order to set up his argument for the American dream (McGuire 16). His dissertation argues that American ideology supports the "hegemony in American society" (McGuire 16). McGuire's work capitalizes on the concept of American ideology as it associates with dominant world power. This holds true for the characters that have been discussed, particularly Superman and Captain America. However, his arguments only include those superheroes and not extreme vigilante anti-heroes such as the Punisher.

The Joke's Not Funny: Joker as an Anti-hero

This section will briefly discuss the role of the Joker as an anti-hero in Alan Moore's graphic novel *The Killing Joke*, illustrated by Brian Bolland in March 1988. Alan Moore presents the Joker as a tragic character. His true identity in Alan Moore's version of the Joker is that of a struggling comedian with a wife and a child on the way during what appears to be a time of depression. He also appears to be part of a marginalized or forgotten socioeconomic class. In *Batman: Year One*, he would have been associated with the destitute common people of Gotham City, helping to emphasize the socioeconomic gap. To get enough money to move his pregnant wife out of the tenements that they occupy, the Joker is forced into getting involved with a robbery at an industrial facility that he had previously worked at in order to "Prove [him]self as a husband and as a father" (Moore 20). He meets the criminal partners at a bar and works up the courage with a few drinks, shortly after which, he is informed that his wife has died in an accident. Although the Joker's wife dies, he goes along with the robbery anyway.

Moore depicts the pre-transformed Joker as a member of the struggling class, who one day made a bad decision. Joker's robbery ultimately fails and he falls into a chemical bath, which disfigures his appearance and apparently his mind. It is without a doubt that Joker acts outside the realm of the commonly accepted hero, and my objective is not to claim that he is a hero, but to examine the decisions that turned him away from heroic conquests and led him down the path of the supervillain. The parallel plot in Moore's graphic novel is Batman's struggle with not wanting to kill the Joker or be killed by him. The Joker shoots Barbara, Commissioner Gordon's daughter, and kidnaps Gordon, keeping him hostage at an abandoned amusement park in an attempt to make him go mad. As he places Gordon on a train heading into a funhouse, the Joker refers to memories, telling Gordon, "when you find yourself locked onto an unpleasant train of thought, heading for the places in your past where the screaming is unbearable,

remember there's always madness [...] madness is the emergency exit" (Moore 26). He tells Gordon that he can "step outside and close the door on all those dreadful things that happened" in regards to upsetting memories (Moore 26). Here the Joker is ultimately referring to himself and how he failed his pregnant wife with a bad decision and a grave mistake.

The Joker shares a similar dissatisfaction of humanity with that of the vigilante, in that he sees optimism, the justice system, and overall outlook on life as weak and bloated with bureaucracy. The Joker refers to Commissioner Gordon as "the average man" as he displays him in a cage for his disciples to look at. He tells them to "notice the hideously bloated sense of humanity's importance" and "the clubfooted social conscience and the withered optimism" in Gordon (Moore 38). He refers to existence as "harsh and irrational" and that the average man has "useless notions of order and sanity" as he continues to berate Gordon in his cage (Moore 38). While the heroes and superheroes try to see the positive side of humanity, the supervillains and anti-heroes only notice the negative aspects of humanity. This is not dissimilar from the Punisher's pessimistic outlook on life. This separation is the misstep that can cause an average person to become a villain or an anti-hero. As he taunts Batman in the funhouse, the Joker says, "All it takes is one bad day to reduce the sanest man alive to lunacy," and "that's how far the world is from where I am [...] just one bad day" (Moore 44). He goes on to ask Batman, "You had a bad day once, am I right?" In reference to Batman's vigilantism, the Joker observes, "you had a bad day and everything changed" (Moore 44). The Joker is keying in on something important, that the separation between good and bad, evil and just, or him and Batman is the difference in how one responds to the stress of an extremely bad day. In Bruce Wayne's case, it was the day his parents were murdered; in the Joker's case, it was the day he lost his pregnant wife. The Joker claims that "everything anybody ever valued or struggled for ... it's all a

monstrous demented gag” in regards to society (Moore 44). In everything that the Joker sees, he believes it to be a sick joke or a ludicrous struggle to no end, so he chooses not to involve himself in the pain of sanity. The behavior that the Joker exhibits in this exchange is that of a mentally ill individual. It associates him with the criminally insane and yet another marginalized member of Gotham’s society. This is another key element that separates him from being the anti-hero and evolving into a villain.

As a supervillain, the Joker is labeled as criminally insane, yet as a person, he is considered mentally ill. In Todd Phillips’s 2019 film, *Joker*, Arthur Fleck, is cast as a socioeconomically marginalized struggling comedian who suffers from mental illness. He is consistently made fun of, picked on, taken advantage of, and verbally and emotionally abused. He is the product of poverty and child abuse, and the heir to depression. Fleck is afflicted with a condition in which he bursts into laughter without cause, disallowing him to hold a job that does not make concessions for his condition. Thus, he is destined to become a street performing clown with aspirations to become a stand-up comedian. He is the product of a struggling class in a poverty and crime ridden city. Goodwin and Tajjudin point out in their article “‘What Do You Think I am? Crazy?’: The Joker and Stigmatizing Representations of Mental Ill-Health” that “mental health issues are trivialized in Batman stories” and that the stories “are often based around the eponymous hero’s attempts to recapture an escaped inmate” (Goodwin and Tajjudin 385). Their observation interestingly emphasizes the dichotomy of the relationship superhero and the supervillain and the superhero, or in this case, Batman and the Joker. The misrepresentation of the mentally ill typically associates this demographic with the criminally insane. In Phillips’s version of the Joker’s creation story, Fleck suffers from mental illness and requires state or federally funded programs for his medication and services. Arkham State

Hospital, as depicted in the film, becomes Fleck's home after his transition into the Joker. His low-income services are defunded by Thomas Wayne and he ultimately ends up in the Arkham hospital. This action marginalizes Fleck's character even further, stigmatizing the marginalized and mentally ill as criminals, murderers, and villains. In the Phillips version, the Joker inadvertently starts a cult following and a lower-class uprising. Though a murderer and a villain, he is treated as an anti-hero by his fellow marginalized society members.

Ultimately, Moore casts the Joker as a tragic victim of circumstance, and Phillips is not far behind. Moore attempts to humanize the Joker through a relatable creation story, recounting his tragic circumstances in parallel with the Joker's attempt to make the sanest person he knows go mad. Phillips sets the ambiance of a socioeconomically marginalized, mentally ill, and depressed victim of child abuse and very unfortunate circumstance. He depicts the supervillain in a way that causes the viewer to think about just how close the Joker is to being an anti-hero. Coming from a socioeconomically marginalized background, he could just as easily have become a champion of the socioeconomically marginalized. Instead, he becomes a villain. Though a tragic character, he chooses the path of the villain nonetheless.

Conclusion

Throughout the course of this thesis the discussion has evolved from the superhero, to a discussion of the vigilante, and to a discussion of the anti-hero. Beginning with an analysis of how Americanism is reflected in some of the earliest caped crusaders, I then venture into an examination of the ideologies embodied in the superheroes, the vigilantes, and the anti-heroes. I make a distinction between characteristics of Superman, Batman, Captain America, the Punisher, and the Joker. Each of these superheroes and anti-heroes, though bearing resemblances, present different connotative properties throughout the comic book universe. This thesis also sought to distinguish between the role of the vigilante and the anti-hero within the comic book universe. This was accomplished by analyzing socioeconomic gaps within Gotham and New York City, while comparing the creation stories of several comic book characters. Ultimately, the role of the anti-hero shares similarities with the role of the villain.

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